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Have You Eaten Yet? The Reader in *A Modest Proposal*

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> I HAVE been assured by a very knowing *American* of my Acquaintance in *London*; that a young healthy Child, well nursed, is, at a Year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome Food; whether *Stewed*, *Roasted*, *Baked*, or *Boiled*; and, I make no doubt, that it will equally serve in a *Fricasie*, or *Ragoust*.

We would prefer to believe that this is not funny, but we laugh.[1] What is the quality of this laughter? What does it tell us about Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal*? And what does it tell us about ourselves?

I

It is not, in any straightforward sense, laughter of release. Swift himself wrote that "the chief end I propose to my self in all my labors is to vex the world rather then divert it,"[2] and this rhetorical principle is nowhere more active than in *A Modest Proposal*. The essay is grotesque without being carnivalesque, and the feeling it induces in readers is one of unease rather than of pleasure or release. It unsettles the reader; here, for example, with the irresistible excess of a list that grinds on, long after we have accepted that it should never have been started. The relentless enumeration of culinary methods fascinates and (in

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a way) amuses—the sentence would be merely repellent if it stopped at the semicolon after "Food."

One would think that the only half-decent thing in a discussion of cannibalism would be to maintain the greatest possible level of abstraction, and not to dwell on the details overmuch. Indeed, this is broadly Daniel Defoe's method in the genocidal proposals of *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702), where the most extreme statements always appear disguised in the abstraction of metaphor. Defoe imitates the guilty logic of oppression in its most plausible form, naturalizing it and its implications even in the face of the objection that burning dissenters would be cruel:

> I answer, 'TIS Cruelty to kill a Snake or a Toad in cold Blood, but the Poyson of their Nature makes it a Charity to our Neighbours, to destroy those Creatures, not for any personal Injury receiv'd, but for prevention; not for the Evil they have done, but the Evil they may do.
>
> Serpents, Toads, Vipers, &c., are noxious to the Body, and poison the sensative Life; these poyson the Soul, corrupt our Posterity, ensnare our Children, destroy the Vitals of our Happyness, our future Felicity, and contaminate the whole Mass!
>
> Shall any Law be given to such wild Creatures? Some Beasts are for Sport, and the Huntsmen give them advantages of Ground, but some are knockt on the Head by all possible ways of Violence and Surprize.
>
> I do not prescribe Fire and Faggot; but as *Scipio* said of *Carthage, Delenda est Carthago,* they are to be rooted out of this Nation, if we will live in Peace, serve God, or enjoy our Own; as for the Manner, I leave it to those Hands, who have a Right to execute God's Justice on the Nation's and the Church's Enemies.[3]

The dissenters are dehumanized (transformed into noisome and poisonous animals), thus turning their threatening nature into a brute fact over which neither they nor reason has any control. Consequently, the reader is presented not with a moral choice so much as a matter of public health; the complex metaphor dulls reactions at precisely the same point where the *Proposal* sharpens them. Defoe's High-Churchman insists that he is not prescribing fire and faggot, but he does leave the matter in "those Hands [the queen's? parliament's? the army's?—the detail is not clarified], who have a Right to execute God's Justice." Unwilling to be explicit in English, he is perfectly happy to advocate genocide

under cover of quotation in the distant and scholarly language of Latin. Scipio was not skirting the issue when he insisted that Carthage had to be destroyed if Rome was to survive. The reference fits the persona's case well, because Rome did demolish Carthage and sow its fields with salt, and then Rome prospered as no other nation. By destroying the Dissenters, the analogy goes, England will both preserve itself from immediate destruction at the hands of its most implacable enemies and guarantee itself a glorious destiny. However, this allegorical connection is offered only in code for the possessor of schoolboy Latin, thus flattering the reader, escaping critical analysis (once one spots an analogy, one seldom scrutinizes it very carefully to see how well it fits), and avoiding an *explicit* statement of bloody intent. Here and throughout *The Shortest Way*, Defoe's narrator uses every trick of rhetoric in order to naturalize brutality.

Swift's Proposer, on the other hand, discusses recipes for stewed baby. If Swift's plan for the readers was first to trick us into temporary assent to the proposal, and then to follow this with an instructive catharsis when we recognize our error and revise our view of the political situation, it would seem that Defoe was a more skillful parodic ironist than he. The *Modest Proposal* is simply too aggressively alienating to be successful as a hoax, and I would suggest that we should not try to read it that way. The text does not make a serious attempt to lull us into a false sense of security. Rather, it attacks us; everywhere it makes us vulnerable. We are exposed to the vicissitudes of moral choice, stretched between the polar claims to authority made, on the one hand, by the delinquent and lunatic Proposer, and, on the other, by an angry but fugitive Swift. What I want to do in this essay is to look carefully at how we readers are positioned in the text and in relation to these polar authorities. My argument is that, while we are exposed to desperate choices and ironies, the textual dislocation is not absolute. We can say nothing *final* about the pamphlet, but we are not entirely cast adrift on a stormy sea of warring discourses or pure textuality. Swift wrote to vex us, indeed, but this vexation has a meaning and a mood. As readers, we are drawn into the insanity of the situation (both historical and rhetorical), and egged on to a grim sort of laughter (or, at least, a humorless anxiety), the implications of which are not easily resolved.

II

From very early on—perhaps even from the title—the text presents us with a problem of decipherment. Certainly, by the

time we have reached the discussion of cooking instructions quoted in the epigraph to this article, we are not inclined to accept the pamphlet as the serious expression of a sane mind. There is little point in attempting to mark a precise point in the text where we begin to realize that the author's meaning diverges from the narrator's. This will vary from reader to reader.[4] Furthermore, the search for such a point makes a couple of assumptions about the reading process that will not bear inspection. First, it assumes fictionally that interpretation goes on in an eternal present of the first reading, that we somehow manage (or ought to manage) to repeat the original fall from innocence to experience on every occasion we read the text. Second, it assumes that, in this first reading, we have no prior knowledge of the text's actual author and his character. Let us review these propositions in turn.

In her illuminating reading of the *Modest Proposal*, Patricia Meyer Spacks aims "to recapture the initial response" and to fend off the "contamination" of second and third readings.[5] As she presents it, this assumption is a hypothesis which enables a certain kind of reading. As a hypothesis it is perfectly valid, but it should not be allowed to harden into a dogma, for it figures forth a sort of reading that does not in fact happen very often, if at all. It assumes that only the *ur*-reading of a text is valid, and that interpretation should confine itself to the attempt to replicate this ideal and fleeting experience. The fallacy of this kindergarten phenomenology has been effectively exposed by Frederick Crews in his devastating characterization of Stanley Fish's affective stylistics:

> Though Fish's theory was clever to a fault, the reader it invoked was a dunce—a Charley Brown who, having had the syntactic football yanked away a hundred times, would keep right on charging it with perfect innocence, never learning to suspend judgment until he arrived at the poet's verb.[6]

Even on the first reading, we are likely to suspend judgment about the *Proposal*'s final meaning. A lot of analysis tends to ignore this very obvious point. Moreover, the *actual* reader of the essay is likely to be a re-reader, trying to work out why it is such a disconcerting piece (why, for example, does one find it funny?) and trying to resolve what Swift might have meant by it.

And I say Swift rather than "the author" advisedly. Swift clung tenaciously to the fiction of anonymity throughout his career,

but the *Modest Proposal* is the least anonymous of his unsigned works. Even if we are willing to privilege the response of Swift's first readers above our own (another proposition that is not unassailable), the *Proposal*'s anonymity was nothing like as significant (or successful) as, for example, *A Tale of a Tub*'s. The pamphlet was published at the height of Swift's notoriety, in Dublin in late October 1729, "with the same imprint and in the same format as *A Short View* and the *Drapier's Letters*."[7] By 8 November, the *Dublin Intelligence* was describing it as "said in public to be written by D— S—."[8] When you add internal evidence such as the rhetorical style and the list of "Expedients" which appears near the end of the essay and outlines with some precision the content of Swift's career in pamphleteering, it is hard to imagine that his authorship of the piece was ever much of a secret in the small world of literary Dublin. And when it was "immediately reprinted in London,"[9] where it might have retained a degree of anonymity, the title-page proclaimed it to be "By Dr. Swift."[10] In 1730 another edition, without Swift's name, was published in London and Dublin, and it was reprinted twice, but by that stage the essay's anonymity was emptily formal. Further tacit acknowledgment of Swift's authorship ensued when the *Proposal* was included in the third volume of the expanded *Miscellanies* of 1732, retained its place in all the editions of the Pope/Swift *Miscellanies* of the 1730s, and was published in volume 4 of George Faulkner's 1738 edition of Swift's *Works*. Though Swift's authorization of none of these collections was publicly explicit, it was never in doubt, and it seems that Swift was never particularly concerned at being recognized as the *Proposal*'s author.

My point, essentially, is that the typical reader, whether of 1729 or today, has always known that she or he is reading a text by Swift, the author of that deceptively complex masterpiece, *Gulliver's Travels*. According to legend, some readers went to their maps in search of Lilliput, but most did not; and I suspect that a similarly small percentage of the *Proposal*'s readers has been slow enough to take it seriously.[11] Consequently, the text has normally been approached as a problem of decipherment rather than one of simple evaluation. We are inventing a historically groundless fiction of readerly innocence in pretending otherwise, and (especially in the face of Swift) it does not seem reasonable that we should pretend to more foolishness than we naturally possess. The interpretation of the *Proposal* has always involved an awareness that it is not a "straight" piece of economic projection, and that Swift is operating independently

of the narrator, in a covert manner. We recognize that there is a gap between the narrator's meaning and the text's, and that a moral-political argument is being carried out by means of parody. However, this recognition is not a solution; it is merely the beginning of our problems.

III

As David Nokes has pointed out, "the key to the *Proposal* is the voice of the proposer."[12] In order to negotiate the ironies of the piece, the reader must learn to distinguish between Swift's voice and the Proposer's. Unfortunately, this is not as easy as the opposing monisms of persona scholarship and biography would have us believe. The battle between these positions is an old one, and does not need a long rehearsal from me.[13] On the one hand, it is argued that the text operates by remote control, on the other that we hear the unmediated voice of Swift. What these approaches have in common is that they center the text securely outside the reader, either in the dramatically coherent character of the eighteenth-century economist or in the biographical Swift. In the practice of actually reading the text, however, neither center will hold. By the same token, neither center is dispensable. Keeping the concepts of Swift and Proposer apart is a complex task, because the margins are not stable, but we need both voices if we are going to get anywhere with this text.[14] Let us set up the poles of Swift's and the Proposer's voices as they operate in reasonably clear examples. The text is most securely in the hands of the Proposer when he lists the six signal advantages that his plan offers to the public. Of these, I will instance only the second: "SECONDLY, The poorer Tenants will have something valuable of their own, which, by Law, may be made liable to Distress, and help to pay their Landlord's Rent; their Corn and Cattle being already seized, and *Money a Thing unknowne*" (12:114–5). From within the narrow confines of economic discourse, nothing is more obvious than that anything which has a money value should be "liable to Distress" in the event of bankruptcy. That is the way the free market works. As the poor are permanently bankrupt, any benefit they might glean from the market in babies' flesh will not (indeed, should not) remain with them. Rents must be paid. The money will "trickle up" (to invert a modern economic metaphor, and perhaps to right it) to those with the power to demand it. Inevitably, the lawyers will collect their margin as this redistribution of wealth takes place. "Distress" is precisely the Proposer's

turn of thought and phrase. It is apparently clinical and bureaucratically neutral (a mere technical term that describes the legal position precisely), but it also masks a violence in the system. The narrator does not "mean" to cause distress. Indeed, he means to disguise the violence as the operation of impersonal and immutable forces. But those resonances in the word are implicit, the iron fist in the economist's (rather moth-eaten) velvet glove. He needs no more than a veneer of respectable legality to cover the fact that the powerless are being pillaged. He knows his audience: in the Irish context, those who can read are among the distrainers. They have already "seized" (another simultaneously legal and violent term) the "Corn and Cattle," and they have a similar right to the babies. As a good economist, the Proposer knows his business better than to appeal to anything higher than selfish greed.

The point is that there is nothing higher than selfish greed within the terms of economic discourse. An ironic (Swiftian) reading is figured beneath the surface, in the structure of the situation, and we readers are expected to decipher this. We are meant to find the greed appealed to cruel and repellent, and to learn to reject the terms of economic discourse that regularize the tyranny. We are meant to see that economies continue to work this way, such that (in our own day) the World Bank insists that poor debtor nations should concentrate on growing cash crops so that they can repay their debts, rather than growing subsistence crops, so that their people should not starve. However, Swift does not breach the parodic decorum of economic language here. He may *manipulate* that language, but the "voice" we "hear" is the Proposer's, and the conclusions we draw work on the silent side of irony. Swift is the architect of this irony, but not directly its enunciator.

That is not the case toward the end of this sentence: "I GRANT this Food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very *proper for Landlords*; who, as they have already devoured most of the Parents, seem to have the best Title to the Children" (12:112). Again we have the distancing effect of legal terminology, and again we have the focus on opportunities for the wealthy rather than necessities of the poor. However, there is something here in excess of the requirements of parodic impersonation; and there is no good reason to call that excess by any other name than the voice of Swift. The point of the breach in decorum is the word "devoured." Its power goes beyond the needs of the dialect of economic discourse, and it points to a completely different way of "hearing" the text. The sudden

savagery follows on through the rest of the sentence so that we are shocked directly by the economic violence of the situation, where landlords are seen to be devouring the tenants whom they should be protecting. The excess of "devoured" also works retrospectively to awaken puns in the words "dear" and "*proper.*" As the Proposer speaks it, the dearness is merely an index of money value. In the market, the infants' flesh will have to attract buyers willing and able to pay a premium for the quality or novelty of the product. However, seen (or, rather, heard) from the broader and more humane perspective of the rest of the sentence, this food becomes "dear" in an emotional sense. A child is dear to her or his parents, and human life *should* be dear to all. Descend to bathos for a moment; we note that "dear" is one of the most common adjectives to attach to a baby. And something similar occurs with "*proper,*" which means little more than appropriate in the Proposer's idiolect. Revised by the Swiftian force of "devoured," however, it recovers much of the weight of its etymology, reminding us of property, propriety, and the act of appropriation by which landlords assume ownership of their vassals, without assuming an appropriate sense of responsibility.

These resonances come from a source other than the economic projector, an ostensibly genuine voice which can usefully be called Swift's. Neither voice is ever solely or indisputably present, and the demarcations between them cannot be firmly marked, but they are necessary hermeneutic tools in any attempt to negotiate the text's ironies. An important qualification of the validity of this project is that voice can only be a metaphoric description in a discussion of written texts. As readers, we invent the concept of the voice. If you doubt this, turn up your hearing-aid, lift this text to your ear, and listen carefully—anything you hear will not have come from me.

This is a glib way of pointing out that the idea of voice is a hermeneutic fiction. Jacques Derrida would have us believe that we should do without the metaphor, and look on language as a silent, sourceless, characterless, and duplicitous written artifact.[15] However, disembodied *écriture* is neither a necessary nor a useful conclusion to the complication of voice figured in the *Proposal.* It withdraws language into a vacuum where moral and political arguments cannot obtain, and where satire has lost all its social referents. You do not explain Swift's writing by draining it of the possibility of meaning anything. An altogether more useful Derridean concept in this context is the idea of erasure. The "voices" of both the Proposer and Swift appear not as stable and integral centers of authority, giving voice to a fullness of presence.

Rather, as mutually antagonistic patterns of absence and presence, they appear under erasure, with the sense of voiced authority flickering back and forth between the two poles.

These erasures are neither neutral nor identical. They operate in critical ways that shape our reactions and judgments as readers. To generalize for a moment, the Proposer is erased in a degenerative or deconstructive manner. The apparent authority with which he commences is incrementally erased, and there are points near the end of the text where it seems meaningless to suggest that he is even a voice being ridiculed; in places he disappears almost completely. On the other hand, the voice of Swift is emergent, becoming clearer through the erasures. Any suitably suspicious reader will sense Swift as a presence looming behind the text from the beginning (an erased and none-too-amused authority), but his actual voice emerges only sporadically and unpredictably. We can hear genuinely Swiftian excess emerging from the Proposer's judicious restraint in the passage which opened this essay: having been informed by the Proposer that babies are a "wholesome Food," it is really Swift who labors the point by suggesting recipes, "whether *Stewed*, *Roasted*, *Baked*, or *Boiled*"; and, should we somehow have missed the point or managed by some ruse to maintain our complacency, he goes on with "and, I make no doubt, that it will equally serve in a *Fricasie*, or *Ragoust*."

This Swift is a sort of guerrilla warrior, camouflaged by irony and hiding in the jungles of the Proposer's misapprehensions and indirections, only to appear explosively in moments such as these: "THOSE who are more thrifty (*as I must confess the Times require*) may flay the Carcase; the Skin of which, artificially dressed, will make admirable *Gloves for Ladies* and *Summer Boots for fine Gentlemen*" (12:112). The initial attention to thrift is very much the Proposer's, but the flaying of the carcass and the leather-work are Swiftian. Indeed, the attentive reader will hear echoes of *A Tale of a Tub*'s flayed woman and the Yahoo-skin shoes with which Gulliver furnishes himself in Houyhnhnmland. This pattern of savage emergence is common, but it is not systematic enough to offer a stable hermeneutic perspective. Swift flickers. He never emerges completely and unproblematically from the erasures to constitute his authority unequivocally.

This is even the case in that most obvious example of Swift's emergence in the *Proposal* —the list of "Expedients" rejected near the end. In this passage, the irony is a function of simple reversal, and the "true" meaning is signaled by the extensive use of italics, which set off Swift's real proposals from the Proposer's

lunacy in a clear and typographic manner. Even here, however, the emergence is not quite complete, and the irony is not entirely evaporated. The list is not simply Swift's unironic description of a ready and easy way to national salvation. A suspicion remains that these proposals might be little more than palliatives to a political and social condition that cannot seriously be expected to recover. You could argue that Swift is protecting himself from ridicule as an enthusiastic projector, proclaiming his nostrum for the public good while maintaining a degree of plausible deniability and not appearing foolishly hopeful. On the other hand, you could argue that he is rejecting even these sober and practical programs (even though they are his own, which he has advocated busily over more than a decade) and descending into despair. Even where he is being most straightforward, "Swift" can be made to "say" both these things.

IV

It is obvious but important to recognize that the *Proposal*'s decipherment is not simply a matter of being shocked into action by the Proposer's obscenities and then reversing the negative in front of the so-called "Expedients." We do not simply discover Swift in the italics. The reading process is not just a matter of moving from one false center in the text to a true one. The erasures blur the voices we hear to make the margins disconcertingly negotiable, and the negotiations are not merely functional or playful. They define the reader's vexed condition, especially in the pamphlet's final paragraphs: "THEREFORE I repeat, let no Man talk to me of these and the like Expedients; till he hath, at least, a Glimpse of Hope, that there will ever be some hearty and sincere Attempt to put *them in Practice*" (12:117). The obvious reading here is to see this as the last words of Swift, signing off with a snarl after his description of the expedients which just might work and handing control of the text (and the world) back to the lunatic projector. Symbolically, he is despairing of the efforts he has made in more than a decade of pamphleteering on Irish problems, and giving up the battle to wrest control of public policy, leaving the field to the fools and the knaves, to the projectors and the apologists.

I agree that this is the gist of the *Proposal*'s conclusion, but it is premature to assume that this is the point in the text where Swift leaves, slamming the door. Through the final three paragraphs he stages a last, savagely ironic battle between his voice and the

mercenary voice of modern scientific projection, a voice which obscures social truths and covers fecklessness and injustice with a veneer of legitimacy. As readers, we are drawn into the implications of this irony, to be shown that we, as a group, prefer to hear the dishonest voice of greedy complacency (the Proposer's) instead of the prophetic voice of condemnation and social regeneration (Swift's). We are made to construct the paradoxes of the situation and relate them to ourselves.

These are large and grandiloquent claims, but we can see how they work in this next paragraph. The trick is to remember to read "my self" ironically, and double the voice throughout: "BUT, as to my self; having been wearied out for many Years with offering vain, idle, visionary Thoughts; and at length utterly despairing of Success, I fortunately fell upon this Proposal; which, as it is wholly new, so it hath something *solid* and *real*, of no Expence, and little Trouble, full in our own Power; and whereby we can incur no Danger in *disobliging* ENGLAND: For, this Kind of Commodity will not bear Exportation; the Flesh being of too tender a Consistence, to admit a long Continuance in Salt; *although, perhaps, I could name a Country, which would be glad to eat up our whole Nation without it*" (12:117). If we read this as the Proposer's discourse, it makes clear sense and offers few difficulties. It commences with a more-or-less empty trope of integrity, asserting the importance of the (fictional) writer's long career of public service. And it continues to speak in tropes of conciliation and calculated persuasion, exhorting the readers to take this ready and easy way to comfort and prosperity, and reminding them (none too subtly) that the English will tolerate only limited kinds of self-help. The prudential rhetoric is slick and hollow, through to the last flourish of italics, which is little less than an open threat. If we imagine this as "speaking" in the Proposer's "voice," the language is all mechanical rationalization. It is absolutely cynical, a public language of manipulative rhetoric rather than a search for the public good, let alone a genuine expression of passion. The Proposer cowers before power and bullies the weak.

We can, however, also read this paragraph as a continuation of Swift's voice, and this gives it a very different resonance. While the Proposer "fortunately fell" upon this idea merely by happy empirical coincidence, Swift calls up the religious idea of the fortunate fall with savage irony. Moreover, instead of being a rehearsal of the Proposer's empty tropes of mock frustration, the revision of Swift's career as "having been wearied out for many Years with offering vain, idle, visionary Thoughts" rings with pathos. This is, indeed, what happened to Swift. What

follows is a grim exposure of the unspoken and oppressive conditions under which anyone takes up her or his pen to write on the condition of Ireland. English mercantilism sets a perimeter around what can possibly be proposed, and English political interests ensure that this line is carefully guarded. The Proposer may align himself with England's unjust authority and edit his thoughts to fit in with the oppression, but Swift rages magnificently at the selfish limitations put upon liberty by venal rulers. He makes the fact of his subjection very clear, and his anger at the devouring nation is only just contained by the sarcastic italics which conclude the paragraph.

The Proposer's voice of reason, and Swift's voice of dark frustration, continue:

> AFTER all, I am not so violently bent upon my own Opinion, as to reject any Offer proposed by wise Men, which shall be found equally innocent, cheap, easy, and effectual. But before something of that Kind shall be advanced, in Contradiction to my Scheme, and offering a better; I desire the Author, or Authors, will be pleased maturely to consider two Points. *First*, As Things now stand, how they will be able to find Food and Raiment, for a Hundred Thousand useless Mouths and Backs? And *secondly*, There being a round Million of Creatures in human Figure, throughout this Kingdom; whose whole Subsistence, put into a common Stock, would leave them in Debt two Millions of Pounds *Sterling*; adding those, who are Beggars by Profession, to the Bulk of Farmers, Cottagers, and Labourers, with their Wives and Children, who are Beggars in Effect;
>
> (12:117)

I am loath to stop in the middle of a sentence, but the semicolon marks an important turning point in the logic of the paragraph. Up to this point, the two authors (Swift and the Proposer) continue on their separate ways in their uncomfortable plurality. Indeed, in this section, the duplicity of Swift's and the Proposer's voices is very neatly dove-tailed. Swift (bitterly) and the Proposer (vaingloriously) assert their willingness to withdraw their opinions if a better solution to Ireland's problems can be put forward. Moreover, both are rather sinister in their rhetorical aggression. The tone of Swift's voice is one of repressed anger perched on the edge of despair. He sees this proposal as a recognition of the value actually put on human life in Ireland—as a systematization (or perhaps no more than a clear view) of what

is actually happening. There is something of King Lear's savage vision of "unaccommodated man" as no more than "a poor, bare, forked animal"[16] about the anatomical minimalism of "a Hundred Thousand useless Mouths and Backs" and "a round Million of Creatures in human Figure." In a fertile land, they are reduced to numbers, reduced to animals, merely by the casual stupidity of the colonizers and the landowners. These "Mortals" (as the paragraph goes on pointedly to describe them) have no life worth living. Without the prospect of a change in this bestial condition, they might as well be consumed sooner as later. At least that way the sum of misery would be less. In his rage, Swift is determined to draw our attention to the fact that the present situation is intolerable and that something needs to be done. He taunts us with the fact of our careless brutality in letting such a situation continue. And the Proposer taunts the readers too, though not with our inhumanity. It is our weak-minded, soft-hearted stupidity that he preens himself against. As he sees it, the material facts of the situation preclude any course of action other than the one he has outlined. We might find this hard, but (as politicians never weary of insisting when prescribing misery for others) *there is no alternative.* From this perspective, the humility of "AFTER all, I am not so violently bent upon my own Opinion, as to reject any Offer proposed by wise Men," is mock humility bordering on sarcasm and arrogance. We will all recognize this aggressive trope. It is followed by grueling mathematical reductionism, which reduces humans to their economic essentials: their basic physical needs and their capital worth. There is none of Swift's militant humanity in the Proposer's version of "a round Million of Creatures in human Figure." As George Wittkowsky explains, this phrase "is obviously soaked in the spirit of political arithmetic,"[17] and, in this sense, language is being used as a buffer against feeling. Thus, the readers are crushed in the pseudo-scientific mechanism of the economist's rhetoric of power, subordinated to his callous sense of vindication.

So, for their very different reasons, both available authors are turning on the readers at this point. As the paragraph continues, the text turns on us in a third way:

> I desire those Politicians, who dislike my Overture, and may perhaps be so bold to attempt an Answer, that they will first ask the Parents of these Mortals, Whether they would not, at this Day, think it a great Happiness to have been sold for Food at a Year old, in the Manner I prescribe; and thereby have avoided such a perpetual Scene of Misfortunes, as they have since gone

> through; by the *Oppression of Landlords*; the Impossibility of paying Rent, without Money or Trade; the Want of common Sustenance, with neither House nor Cloaths, to cover them from the Inclemencies of Weather, and the most inevitable Prospect of intailing the like, or greater Miseries upon their Breed for ever.
>
> (12:117–8)

The vivid shock here lies not in the ironic modulation between Swift's voice and the voice of the Proposer. That game is suspended for the moment as the paternalist decorum of eighteenth-century public discourse is broken and we attend for a few rare lines to the voice of the oppressed. I do not wish to present Swift as a sort of belated Leveler—on any reading of his biography, especially his recorded opinions on the Irish peasantry,[18] that is quite absurd—but there is enough anarchy in his wild Toryism to allow for an impersonation of that voice. He asks the question his readers do not dare to ask: What do the poor think? The fact of a paternalistic conspiracy of silence flickers suddenly into focus from the perspective of the poor and the starving. All the way through the *Proposal*, and all the way through eighteenth-century public culture, the language and concerns of the ruling class offer the only points of reference. The Proposer only attends to the fact of poverty from the ways it impinges on the lives of the gentry. This is exposed most clearly in the various advantages enumerated for the proposal (12:114–6), and the various objections entertained against it, which clearly inhabit a discourse whose coordinates are bounded by the class interests of the moneyed and the literate. However, throughout the *Proposal* the problems addressed are those of the relatively wealthy rather than the destitute. At the beginning, it is our delicate sensibilities as witnesses of misery which are assailed: "IT is a melancholy Object to those, who walk through this great Town, or travel in the Country; when they see the *Streets*, the *Roads*, and *Cabbin-doors* crowded with *Beggars* of the Female Sex, followed by three, four, or six Children, *all in Rags*" (12:109). Thus we are addressed throughout, discomforted subjects assailed by the melancholy and nearly inanimate objects of misery. In eighteenth-century culture at large, this glass floor of concern is usually transparent and unproblematic. "Our" concerns tend to transmute themselves insensibly (as Gibbon would put it) into universalities. Beneath polite and civilized

society there is a blank, covered (if at all) by the pieties of religion and the nostrums of economics.

This moment in the *Proposal* where we are desired not to pontificate in a disembodied way about the poor, but to "first ask the Parents of these Mortals, Whether they would not, at this Day, think it a great Happiness to have been sold for Food at a Year old, in the Manner I prescribe" brings the glass floor of public discourse to our attention. We realize that there are people beneath it, people beneath our concerns, "Mortals," "Creatures in human Figure," who suffer in ways that we can scarcely imagine. Suddenly we recognize the fact of their erasure from public discourse. They are, occasionally, the objects of discussion, but never discoursing subjects. To give voice to their position is to breach an unacknowledged and potent decorum, not just of economic discourse, but of all eighteenth-century public language. To attend to this voice causes acute discomfort in the ruling-class reader because it throws our morality and prudential concerns into sharp relief. Even horror at cannibalism is a luxury which some cannot afford, yet we continue to worry about rents, religious differences, commerce, the institution of marriage, and variety on the menus of tavern-keepers.

I mean "we" in two senses, one historical and the other current. In the historical sense pertaining to the readership of 1729, Swift and the Proposer are very aware that their audience is a coherent group with certain common interests. The *Proposal* is deliberately addressed not to oppressing England (who would not care) or to all the Irish (most of whom could not read), but to the Anglo-Irish, a class debilitated in part by English colonialism and in part by its own fecklessness.[19] The members of this class are being called to their responsibilities and reminded of the guilt they share for the condition of their country. They are, quite literally, Dublin merchants, Cork clergymen, Limerick gentry, being vexed both by a hard look at their own condition and at the condition of those who depend on them. Just how narrowly the *Proposal* is targeted at the concerns of this group is made clear by this momentary attention to the voice of the oppressed.

To attempt to include ourselves in this group is, obviously, an extreme and improbable act of historical imagination, but we are *the readers* in another sense, which explains much about the *Proposal*'s abiding power to discomfort. While people continue to starve and to live in abject poverty, an analogy exists between Swift's readers' situation and our own, and, as readers, we remain on the guilty side of the divide between oppressors and oppressed. In the subversive light cast by this moment, it is

made very clear that there are the eaters and the eaten in this world, and we are among the eaters. The prospect of thinking it "a great Happiness to have been sold for Food at a Year old" continues to accuse us because, as participants in the public sphere, we do not belong to the group from whom the eaten will be chosen. And neither is the eating as theoretical a proposition as we would like to believe. It does not stretch the metaphor very far to suggest that the present system of starvation and grinding poverty (both in eighteenth-century Ireland and in the twentieth-century world), though less subtly articulated than the *Modest Proposal*'s scheme for making the poor "*beneficial to the Publick*" (12:109), is, in its own clumsy way, morally and physically equivalent to it. From below, the alternatives do not look very different. Indeed, one comfortable, well-fed year followed by an easeful oblivion has a lot to recommend it. It is only from above (from the reader's perspective) that the prospect of eating those we *call* our fellow mortals is nauseating. But we are eating them anyway.

V

I would argue, then, that at the heart of the *Proposal*'s abiding power to unsettle readers lies Swift's positioning of the readers among the eaters. The sudden, defamiliarizing shock when we hear an outside voice confirms us in this associational guilt, and we can never entirely escape this guilt without repudiating the text and our position in it. Obviously, all this had very sharp and particular connotations in the historical moment of the essay's publication. The English were eating the Irish in general and the Anglo-Irish were eating the Teagues. Those who could read such a pamphlet almost by definition had sufficient wealth and social power to be implicated in the oppression. The essay insists that they had better learn to call what they are letting happen by its true name. However, the bite on the reader is not just a period piece, a historic reconstruction of distant readers' hypothetical experience. While people continue to starve, and continue to lead brutalized lives, the *Modest Proposal* remains as a standing accusation to those of us who can read it. The story of our reading is the uneasy story of our implication in injustices which we contribute to and allow to continue. It confronts us with the consequences of our indifference.

For Swift has always been there ahead of the reader, not to prepare the way but, rather, to lay mines in it. The last twist of this entrapment comes in the final paragraph: "I PROFESS, in

the Sincerity of my Heart, that I have not the least personal Interest, in endeavouring to promote this necessary Work; having no other Motive than the *publick Good of my Country, by advancing our Trade, providing for Infants, relieving the Poor, and giving some Pleasure to the Rich.* I have no Children, by which I can propose to get a single penny; the youngest being nine Years old, and my Wife past Child-bearing" (12:118). Swift is tracking us on the way out of the text, frustrating our natural desire for a comfortable disengagement. Certainly, this is the last crazy reprise of the Proposer, his voice reasserting control over a text that has wandered. His slimy insistence that he will not profit is clearly absurd, because he and his children belong to the eating classes, like us readers and our children. He (and we) will at least get a new dish and a healthier economy; he (and we) may even profit more directly from the new trade in babies. However, the spectacularly hollow trope of disinterestedness springs a further, final trap, in that it bars the path of disinterest for us as a way out of the situation. We cannot escape this text simply by proclaiming that we are not involved. That would be a return to the guilty bad faith which has just been exposed. Unless we are prepared to follow the Proposer into the land of self-righteous moral lunacy, we are confronted again with our complicity in the situation and with the necessity of doing something significant for the "*publick Good.*" So we leave the text laughing at the Proposer, but it is bitter and uneasy laughter, because it is also turned on ourselves.

NOTES

[1]Jonathan Swift, *Prose Works,* ed. Herbert Davis, 14 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1939–68), 12:111; all subsequent references to Swift's prose are to volume and page in this edition, hereafter *Prose,* and may appear parenthetically in the text.

[2]Letter to Pope, 29 September 1725; Jonathan Swift, *Correspondence,* ed. Harold Williams, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963–65), 3:102.

[3]Daniel Defoe, *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters and Other Pamphlets* (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press by Basil Blackwell, 1928), p. 126.

[4]Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 107–9, maps the reader's process of discovery in this manner, and shows that there is no single point at which the text determinately stops being impersonation and becomes irony. However, he also identifies the entrance of the idea of babies being food as a point of no return.

[5]Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Some Reflections on Satire," *Genre* 1, 1 (January 1968): 13–30, 18; rprt. in *Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism,* ed. Ronald Paulson (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 360–78, 365.

[6]Frederick Crews, *Skeptical Engagements* (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), p. 124. Crews rather inconveniently goes on to make a point

that tends to undermine my own and all reader-oriented positions, stating that "'the reader' is simply the critic's marionette" (p. 127). This is true, but I do not see that a certain degree of puppeteering is avoidable in any act of interpretation. Crews advocates a renewed faithfulness toward the author, but "the author" has a long and guilty history of acting as the critic's marionette, and it seems even more impertinent to make statements on her or his behalf than on "the reader's"— a critic can at least speak with authority as *a* reader of a text. My other defense against this accusation is that I do not use the term "the reader" in an altogether abstract and universalizing sense. As I will go on to explain, it is important to have a historical sense of who actual readers of the *Proposal* were and are. Swift's essay was and continues to be a political document: its reception does not occur in an abstract hermeneutic vacuum.

[7]*Prose*, 12:xix.

[8]Quoted in *Prose*, 12:xix–xx.

[9]*Prose*, 12:xx.

[10]See Hermann Teerink and Arthur Scouten, *A Bibliography of the Writings of Jonathan Swift*, 2d edn. (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1963), #677. Given Swift's long history of anonymous publication, it is inconceivable that he would have *approved* of being named, but the fact is that it did happen.

[11]There is very little recorded response to the *Proposal* at its first appearance in the world. Lord Bathurst alludes to it extensively in a letter to Swift, 12 February 1729/30, *Correspondence*, 3:371–3, in a bantering tone which suggests that he realizes that eating people is wrong. He does not, however, appear to have picked up the political implications of the piece. It is a depressing prospect to consider how so explosive a piece as the *Proposal* should have exploded in almost total silence.

[12]David Nokes, *Jonathan Swift, A Hypocrite Reversed: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), p. 348.

[13]For a clear rehearsal of the issues and a convincing demonstration that persona versus author is not really an either/or argument, see Fredric V. Bogel, "Irony, Inference, and Critical Uncertainty," *Yale Review* 69, 4 (June 1980): 503–19.

[14]For a reading of the *Proposal* in terms of voices and Bakhtinian dialogue, see Lloyd Davis, "Reading Irony: Dialogism in *A Modest Proposal*," *AUMLA* 77 (May 1992): 32–55.

[15]This is the broad thrust of much of Derrida's philosophy of language, especially of *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974). Even Derrida cannot get by altogether without the metaphor of voice. See *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 332: "But the death of that representative voice, that voice which is already dead, does not amount to some absolute silence that would at last make way for some mythical purity of writing, some finally isolated graphy. Rather, it gives rise to an authorless voice, a phonic tracing that no ideal signified or 'thought' can entirely cover in its sensible stamp without leaving something out." This is still more abstract than the concept of voice I wish to use here, but I quote this to indicate that belief in "some mythical purity of writing, some final isolated graphy" is not a necessary consequence of skepticism concerning the sources of written "utterances." Texts do generate "phonic tracing[s]" in their readers, and I am following these in the *Proposal*.

[16]William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, ed. Russell Fraser (New York: Signet-Penguin, 1987), III.iv.109–10.

[17]George Wittkowsky, "Swift's *Modest Proposal*: The Biography of an Early

Georgian Pamphlet," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4, 4 (January 1943): 75–104, 100.

[18]See Nokes, *Jonathan Swift, A Hypocrite Reversed* for a general view of this. For arguments more closely related to the *Modest Proposal* and its context, see Nokes's two articles, "Swift and the Beggars," *Essays in Criticism* 26, 3 (July 1976): 218–35, and "The Radical Conservatism of Swift's Irish Pamphlets," *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 7 (1984): 169–76; and, for a reading of the *Proposal* in similar terms, see Claude Rawson, "A Reading of *A Modest Proposal*," in *Order from Confusion Sprung: Studies in Eighteenth-Century Literature from Swift to Cowper* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), pp. 121–44.

[19]The nature and interests of this group have recently been surveyed in S. J. Connolly, *Religion, Law, and Power: The Making of Protestant Ireland, 1660–1760* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). For the purposes of this essay, Connolly's book offers a very full and important description of the *Proposal*'s historical target audience.